

Lighting The Fire: Inspiring Boys To Become Readers

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What aspects of reading engage boys? This paper looks at the importance of reading, some of the current thinking about boys and reading, and research carried out among students of St Andrew's Cathedral School, where a reading culture has developed. What implications do these findings have for our profession - for school libraries and teacher librarians? What other strategies can we employ to encourage our students to develop a lifelong love of reading? The strategies include the idea of a Literature Festival, other reading programmes, ways of integrating technology into the reading experience and the Literature Circles model at St Andrew's.

Reading books is of paramount importance for boys, not simply in terms of school achievement, but because books and reading enhance their lives. Reading literature affects the way we think, what we understand about the world, and the way we 'nurture our soul'. Books can inspire us and expand our horizons. Boys need books for inspiration for images to think with. With books, boys can explore the diversity, complexity and strangeness of human experience. (Sanderson, 1995, p.156)

The value of reading

What is it that we value about reading that makes us desire to help boys develop an interest in it? Why would we like them to become committed and discerning readers? Isn't it because we believe it will enrich and enlarge their lives, expand their horizons, and set them up for success in many other areas of their lives?

As teacher librarians we are 'link' people, connectors and mediators of information and their related skills, and we see reading as a vital link and an essential lifelong skill for our students.

- We know it can bring joy and entertainment, even healing at times.
- We believe it fosters personal growth and insight, opening options for choice and change.
- Reading extends our experience of life, others and the world. It helps us develop empathy for others by allowing us to walk in their shoes through a story.
- It helps develop our own imaginations.
- It hones our skills in reading and language, helping us to become proficient users.

*It is with words, by words, through words that we make sense of ourselves...
What we can do with ourselves is limited by what we can do with language...*

Language is a condition of being human; literature is a birthright. (Chambers, 1985, pp5, 10).

One of Australia's most popular writers for young people, whose works are avidly read by many boys, is Paul Jennings; he is also a crusader for reading. One of the motivations that drives him is expressed in the following extract from a newspaper article:

If reading is power, then Jennings sees those who cannot read as powerless. 'It is no coincidence that something like two out of three people in jail cannot read,' he says. 'If people are unable to read they can't participate in society, and sometimes turn antisocial.' (Berry, 2004b).

Poor reading skills can discourage boys and result in frustration and low self-esteem. We want our students to have empowered and satisfying lives, and so we are committed to developing them as readers. However, challenges exist as to whether our pedagogical construction and teaching of literacy within school is actually meeting boys' needs.

General research into reading and learning

Research supports perceptions concerning the benefits of reading. Stephen Krashen believes that in order to become readers, students need to read a lot and that the benefits are manifold:

Reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion, however: Reading is the only way... we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers (Krashen, 1993, p23).

Krashen advocates "free voluntary reading" and "sustained silent reading", leading to significant improvements in student achievement. Many of Krashen's findings are powerful advocacy tools for school libraries. Through his research, he determined that access to a school library resulted in more reading and that larger collections were reflected in higher reading scores; that the presence of a school librarian made a difference in the amount of reading young adults did; that reading magazines, teen romances and comics promoted and led to other reading; that the absence of good books was a significant aspect in lack of interest in reading (Krashen, 1993). Keith Curry Lance's research also reinforces the impact of the school library on reading performance: "When school libraries have higher levels of professional and total staffing, larger collections of print and electronic resources, and more funding, students tend to earn higher scores on state reading tests." (Lance, 2002).

A recent study focusing on the lives and literacy aspects of 49 boys living in a wide range of different circumstances and using the work of the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi as a lens to understand them, has been completed by Wilhelm and Smith (2002) and published in the book *Reading don't fix no chevys*. Many interesting findings have come out of this study, particularly the fact that these students, despite a disconnection with literacy within school, had rich literate lives out of school and used a range of literacy skills to achieve their goals (Wilhelm & Smith, n.d. cited by Hyatt, 2002). The students did not value reading for the reasons their English teachers did, but valued it as a tool; they preferred immediate feedback and short informational texts like magazines and newspapers. The broad focus on the lives of these students has shown that they do read, but that there can be a great contrast between life reading and school reading. Wilhelm and Smith suggest:

- using a framework of inquiry to teach literature to maintain motivation and allow students to connect with their own experience and interests
- broadening the view of what is worthwhile reading
- offering a choice in reading matter
- developing lessons that are “active, social and visual”
- strengthening home-school links (Hyatt, 2002).

Dale Spender (2004) makes the point that boys do well in most places except school, with their often extraordinary digital literacy skills, that they are actually “ahead of the school” and that it is schools that are under-performing and behind the times due to the influential residue of 19th century classroom conventions. Schools need also to value the digital literacy of their students and integrate opportunities for employing these skills into teaching and learning.

The PISA Project (The Programme for International Student Assessment), conducted in 2000 to assess the performance of students in 32 countries in reading, scientific and mathematical literacy, has provided substance for much reflection on education. In the report the question was asked, “Are keener readers also better readers?” and on average in each country the answer is yes. One of the findings in the report was that students in Australia who read 1-2 hours per day for enjoyment had a reading score 92 points higher on average than their counterparts who did not read for enjoyment, indicating a clear correlation between reading for enjoyment and achievement (OECD, 2000, p15). Boys generally perform less well in reading and in standardised tests than girls and in the PISA report, females did better in every country in reading literacy (OECD, 2000, p16). In the US National Center for Education Statistics report on trends in the reading performance of 9, 13 and 17-year-olds, it was found that “for all assessment years [1971-1999] and ages, the average score for females was higher than that of males.” (NCES, 2001). There is a far greater number of boys with special learning needs, often about 70% of learners (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p198, 208). However, Sanderson (1995, p155) believes that many boys who struggle with reading do so because they are “inexperienced readers” rather than because they have a problem in their physical-cognitive functions.

Biological differences

Brain research has shown that males and females process information in different ways, particularly in relation to emotions and spatial navigation (Fogarty, 1997, p32). The right brain handles spatial manipulation, patterns and forms while the left brain specialises in language and logic (Smith, 2001). Boys have a 15% larger brain, although they lose brain tissue at three times the rate of women. They are mainly right brain thinkers and often struggle to talk about their emotions and have more difficulty in reading. Research has shown that there are 30% more connections in the female brain in the corpus callosum, which links the two hemispheres of the brain (Smith, 2001). Girls experience earlier development of their verbal and linguistic skills and find that verbal and emotional expression comes more easily. There are also differences in brain chemistry between the sexes, and the influence of hormones impacts on thinking and problem solving (Fogarty, 1997, p32).

Gender construction

Boys are strongly influenced by the dominant forms of masculinity in their society and by successful role models. They absorb the associated beliefs and stereotypes about what it means to be male (Browne, 1995, p227). An issue underpinning the reluctance of many boys to read is the perception of reading as something both passive and feminine, and therefore inherently alien (Moloney, 2000, p45-47); this is often reinforced by fathers' lack of involvement and interest in reading themselves and in their sons' reading (Sanderson, 1995, pp159-161). We need to empower boys to be discerning about gender stereotypes and the subtle messages about gender that are embedded in films, advertising and television programmes and we need to be perceptive ourselves about how school and education shape the notion of masculinity (Browne, 1995, p233). Scieszka puts it this way: "We tell boys that reading is important and that reading is for everyone...[however,] we show boys that reading is just for girls" (cited in Myers, 2002, p.3).

What we need are models of masculine behaviour that do not link literacy with the feminine and which embrace books and reading as an accepted and vital part of being a man... No longer should we focus solely on the boys. Change the men and you will change the boys. (Moloney, 1999, p.13)

Many students who enjoy reading are reluctant to describe themselves as readers. In my small research project at St Andrew's Cathedral School, where a reading culture does exist, 190 students were asked two questions in order to assess their enjoyment of reading and self-perception as readers.

• Do you like to read?	YES	50%
• Do you like to read?	NO	17%
• Would you call yourself a reader?	YES	26%
• Would you call yourself a reader?	NO	37%

In answering the question **Do you like to read?** some students gave Yes/No answers and some left the answer blank. In most classes the pattern was that 50% or less students who enjoyed reading would call themselves readers. Nichols has commented that in a literacy study involving fathers, many regarded themselves as non-readers at some point during their schooling and that 'negative identification with reading was associated with a positive identification with perceived masculine activities and qualities' (cited in Gilbert, 1998, p215).

Research project at St Andrew's Cathedral School

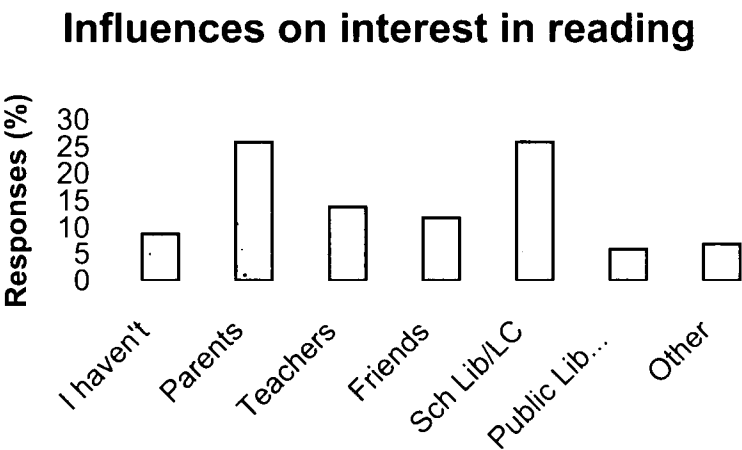
In the second half of 2003 a small research project into boys' reading was carried out at St Andrew's Cathedral School through the Literature Circles programme, which is run by the school library in conjunction with the English Department. In brief, Literature Circles is an intensive reading programme, which encourages the habit of daily reading for enjoyment, using attractive contemporary well-written books with a strong story. The library holds multiple copies of selected books for the programme. The class cycles through the phases of quiet reading in class and at home, discussions with the group reading the same book and writing the occasional response to the book. Above all, the aim is enjoyment. Students have a choice of selected texts. These are all strong stories, carefully selected by the teacher librarian and known to interest boys. The programme allows time for sustained silent reading, and for

reflection on the text. The research sample was 190 male students aged 13-16 who answered a questionnaire about their reading. Some of the areas covered by this research were:

- self-perception in terms of reading
- influences on their reading
- the best books they had read
- elements in the story which appeal most
- favourite authors
- aspects of reading which create difficulty/barriers, and
- preference for fiction/non-fiction and formats that appeal most, including e-books.

In the questionnaire students were asked to tick up to three influences, which had helped them develop an interest in reading. Figure 1 shows the primary categories of influence for St Andrew’s students in this area were parents (26%) and the school library, including the Literature Circles programme (26%). 79 students out of the sample of 190 nominated their parents and the school library as the two main influences on their reading. Teachers were also significant influences (14%). Friends (12%) and public libraries (7%) were significant to a smaller number of students.

Figure 1: What has helped you develop an interest in reading?



In response to the question, **What are the five best fiction books you have read?** it was found that the novels of Matthew Reilly (*Ice Station*, *Area 7*, *Temple* and *Contest*) gained 96 nominations. He is the most successful author in our Literature Circles. For the list of nominated titles, see the Appendix, Table 1.)

The Harry Potter books have only sometimes been used; for example, when a new novel has just been released or when a small group is keen to read one of these novels. Many students had read these independently of Literature Circles.

Lord of the Rings has sometimes been used with Literature Circles classes and its popularity may have been affected by the release of the Peter Jackson films.

Every one of the most popular nine novels (with 15 or more votes) has been used in Literature Circles or introduced as an English text or both.

- 26 out of the 52 novels on the list have been used or introduced to students in Literature Circles.
- Seven of the 52 novels have been introduced to students as an English text.
- Seventeen of the 52 novels, nearly one third, are Australian.

In answer to the question **What made these books the best?** students were asked to tick the main three reasons why particular aspects of their favourite books made them the best they have read, that is, which aspects of the story appealed to them most. The results are below:

Author's writing style	13%	Great characters	19%
Fast-paced action	12%	Imaginative storyline	12%
Great descriptions	9%	Easy to visualise	9%
Interesting plot	17%	Sequels to continue on with	6%

Character and plot were the most highly valued aspects of a story followed by the writing style, action and storyline. Boys clearly appreciate what makes a good story. The level of response (9%) for books that were easy to visualise was relatively high. Visualisation of fictional text is an issue for a significant number of students.

Students were also asked **Who are your favourite authors?** (Appendix, Table 2). The findings were that Matthew Reilly, J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, who were the most popular, were favoured across nearly every single class. John Marsden, Roald Dahl and Anthony Horowitz were also highly appreciated by a considerable number of students. Students were introduced to all authors with more than 10 nominations via Literature Circles or as English texts. Half of the most popular authors in the table were introduced through Literature Circles (16 out of 32). Nearly one-quarter of these authors were Australian. The heavy weighting of favourite titles and authors from the Literature Circles collection in these lists may demonstrate both the crucial role of selecting books and also the powerful effect of a programme of sustained reading with strong texts.

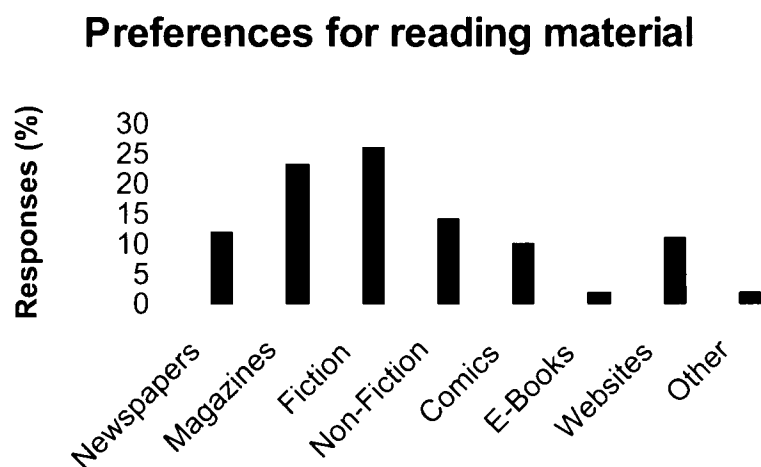
In the questionnaire students were asked to provide no more than two responses to **What have you found to be the most difficult thing/s about reading?** There were 228 responses from 190 students as follow:

- I get too easily distracted from reading 23%
- I haven't found reading difficult at all 21%
- Reading is not active enough for me 17%
- My reading speed is too slow 15%
- Sometimes I can't follow the line changes correctly 7%

- I find it difficult to visualise in my mind what I read 5%
- It's hard for me to make sense of the words together 4%
- I find it hard to understand the vocabulary or words used 4%
- Reading gives me headaches 4%

Distractions (23%), the perception of reading as a passive activity (17%) and a slow reading speed (15%) were seen as the primary difficulties. 21% of students did not find reading difficult at all.

Figure 2: What types of material do you like to read?



Answers to the question **What types of material do you like to read?** indicated the top three choices in types of reading material and the formats which appealed to students most. Fiction was overwhelmingly the favourite type of reading material (26%). I wonder whether this is usual or due to the nurturing of a reading culture. Magazines were the next most popular form of reading (23%) followed by non-fiction books (14%). Newspapers (12%) then websites (11%) and comics (10%) were next in the ranking of popularity. There is a change to an emphasis on non-fiction in Year 10 although the level of preference for fiction is still nearly as high. In Year 7 comics are as favoured as fiction. E-books were the final choice and accounted for 7 votes or 2%. See figure 2.

Implications for school libraries and teacher librarians

Libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to improving our quality of life. Libraries change lives for the better. (Sidney Sheldon, quoted in ASLA, NSW, 2003)

Teacher librarian role and manner

The teacher librarian’s role as “the enabling adult” (Chambers, 1991) is vital in linking boys and books together. Gwenda Sanderson describes her role as “a mediator for

learning about literature and becoming literate. If you like, I am their stockbroker.” (Sanderson, 1995). The role is multi-faceted and covers aspects such as:

- creating a warm and pleasant ambience
- maintaining a positive attitude towards students and staff
- being aware of current literature and what appeals to boys
- developing the collection in an informed and sensitive way with provision for difference,
- promoting books
- taking the time to match the boy to the book
- using opportunities to discuss literature and strategies, and
- modelling our own excitement about the books (Sanderson, 1995).

In our libraries we need to create a pleasant ambience for reading and just being – comfortable seating, floor space to lie down, a sense of ownership of the space. The collection needs to be organised so that it is attractive, accessible and clear. Reading feels more pleasurable and satisfying when it is linked with security, warmth, and comfort.

The attitude of staff is crucial. A respectful, positive, and warm manner, which demonstrates a willingness to listen and assist and when necessary, to be firm, is the most successful. We need to be open-minded to the boys’ interests and accept all their reading as valid and help them to do this for themselves too (Myers, 2002). We also need to maintain high expectations for our students as this is deeply influential in helping them to achieve.

How do we identify what will interest boys?

Seeking absorbing reading material for boys becomes a quest. Collection development with boys clearly in mind is needed and this covers both fiction and non-fiction areas and the awareness of catering for differing ability levels and interests. We can inform our selection of books through continual reading, listening and discussion with colleagues, students, friends and English teachers. We can seek out specific titles or types of books similar to ones that our boys have already enjoyed. Networking with colleagues via email and listservs like OZTL_NET, LM_NET, SLM_NET and IASL-LINK can be particularly effective. A co-operative effort gathered from colleagues around the world through these listservs, a list of recommended fiction for boys aged 12-16, can be found in the Appendix in Table 3. It is interesting to note how widely appreciated some titles are. The staff of a good children’s bookshop can be a wonderful resource for ideas. Developing our awareness of award-winning books, bestseller lists, and professional reading of book reviews and journals (*SCAN*, *Literature Base*, *Magpies*, *Rippa Reading*, *Horn Book*, websites, etc.) can fill in many gaps in our collection and help us find just the book for niche readers. We especially need to listen to students’ recommendations and give them choice in their reading. We need to be aware of good strong stories with elements important to boys. The focus for teacher librarians should be on enjoyment of the story.

Books which appeal to boys

A good book for a boy is one that takes him to places he has never imagined and shows him things that dazzle his mind. A good book challenges him to

think about the world and his place in it. A good book stands firm in the face of the stereotypes that society presses on him, drawing out the emotional experience of his humanity which he might otherwise deny and repress. A good book is a rollicking yarn that tweaks his sense of adventure and absorbs him so completely that he battles alongside the hero and rejoices in the final victory as if it was his own. (James Moloney, n.d.)

Aspects of books that tend to appeal to boys are humour, action, war and horror stories. They like writing that is connected to real life, including non-fiction, and which has a natural accessible writing style; short paragraphs and chapters are preferable (Sanderson 1995). Boys also enjoy comics, joke books and books linked to current films. Fantasy, science fiction (Gordon-Hall, n.d.) and graphic novels are also popular. Providing other formats such as audio books and e-books can encourage reading in some boys. Magazines are usually a high interest format for boys; buying these can be a good investment in building reading capital. Boys enjoy and need adventure, one reason adventure stories appeal to them. At the Australian School Library Association conference in Hobart in 2003, Anthony Horowitz echoed the same thoughts in speaking about his Alex Rider fantasy action series, as did Gary Crew, an Australian writer of primarily historical fiction. Boys' lives can be so constrained and protected today, they need the chance to live adventurous heroic lives, even if it is vicariously.

How can we connect the boy with the book?

What libraries give you is all three tenses -- the past tense -- the present tense in which we live and the future that we can only imagine. These places have teachers who are living and dead and we are lucky to have them. If I sit here and read Aristotle, he is speaking to me across a thousand years -- more than a thousand years. That sense that I am in the company of the greatest people who ever lived is a humbling experience but a liberating experience. (Columnist Pete Hamill, New York Daily News, quoted in ALA, 2004)

Promotion of reading through displays, posters, book competitions, browsing boxes, can all help to hook a boy into reading. Putting the books where the boys will see them is a useful strategy, even if it is next to the computers (Jones & Fiorelli, 2003). We can provide as many access points as possible such as book lists at appropriate levels and on the library website. Good author talks can lead to many students reading all the works of the visiting author. Boys even like to hear about our own contact with authors and the stories behind their books. We can develop our own skills in giving book talks, thoughtfully preparing a natural overview and reading a short passage from the book to give a flavour of the author's writing style and to leave the students in a bit of suspense. These book talks are essentially motivational talks; boys often like to hear us read aloud but most are put off if they have to read aloud and so this is best avoided. The main points of the talk can be kept on a card system, perhaps with potential questions for discussion. Finding the right book for an individual student through discussion and matching their reading ability and interest is still one of the most effective ways of connecting boys with books.

In our library we recently had a couple of notable successes in matching a boy with a book. One of our Primary library staff members encourages teachers to send poor readers to the library individually with a note so that she can talk to the child, find out his interests and offer various books; she has an extraordinary knack with this, almost an extra-sensory perception of a child's reading needs. One struggling reader, aged about 9, who enjoyed

surfing came down and after consultation she found him a book. His delighted teacher brought down his reading log a few days later. It contained some coherent comments including the statement, "I never thought anyone would be able to find the perfect book for me." But she did! Another incident occurred with a 16 year old boy who last year had been in the lowest English class, a student who did not enjoy reading. He was reading at lunchtime in a café and a friend went up to him and said she hadn't expected to see him reading. He told her that it was the teacher librarian's fault because she had persuaded him to read *Ice Station* in Literature Circles last year and since then he couldn't stop reading and he reads every night before going to bed. That was blame we were very happy to receive.

Literature festivals have been held with considerable success at some schools. These can be expensive, high profile events, but on a smaller scale could be organised by many schools. They raise the profile of books and can open boys' eyes to what is available for them. A couple of examples are the All Saints' Literature Festival, <http://www.allsaints.wa.edu.au/> and the Scotch Literature Festival, http://library.scotch.vic.edu.au/library/scotch_literature_festivals.

Peer recommendations are very powerful and any way of generating these is useful. In the past year in our library we had a quarterly newsletter, which was the initiative of two or three 12 year olds; they called it Book News and it contained reviews, jokes, author information and interviews with staff about their reading. The only thing we as the library staff needed to do was proof-read and photocopy it.

Integrating technology and reading

Access to technology is a drawcard for most boys with their interest in and level of digital literacy. There are numerous activities related to reading that can be linked to an online activity, including investigations about authors. Jennie Bales (2001) explored the idea of using a learning community MOO (Multi-Object Orientated domain) as a forum for the discussion component of a literature circles programme; the teacher can then retrieve a transcript of the online discussion.

Another way of integrating technology into the reading process is to allow boys to use a blog as a reading journal. Students can express themselves freely and develop their voice in an online environment. (See <http://www.schoolblogs.com/> and <http://www.bookblog.net/>)

Book Raps have been a popular group literature-based activity in Australia, essentially a book discussion via email. These were started as part of the Oz-Teachers project many years ago. A teacher has to register his/her class and then students participate in group discussions to prepare a coherent response to the rap points raised; this response is then posted via email. There is a special book rapping jargon which can appeal to students. The rappers are the people engaged in the book rap. They use a rap map to mark the location of other rappers. They discuss rap points which are based around an issue or event in the book. A rap record is kept of the email discussion. There are rap rules to guide the book rap process and the concluding message is called the rap wrap up. The NSW website is <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoollibraries/teaching/raps/>

Reading programmes

Given the importance of silent sustained reading, we need to schedule time for reading (Pritchard, n.d.) and seek programmes to motivate boys to read (Myers, 2002). Many

different reading programmes have been used in Australian schools to encourage reading in all students with considerable success. Often they are referred to by memorable or curious acronyms: FISH - Fiction in School Hours; RAGE - Read and Gain Enjoyment; DEAR - Drop Everything and Read; LOVIT - Literature On Various Interesting Themes; RIBIT - Read In Bed It's Terrific; ROBOT - Read Our Books On Themes; BASS - Becoming a successful student; USSR - Uninterrupted sustained silent reading, and SQUIRT - Sustained quiet uninterrupted independent reading time (Chambers, 1991, 36; Moloney, 2000). Often these programmes have been run for 15 minutes per day in roll call. In co-educational schools, single sex reading opportunities seem to work better for boys.

In Australia there is also a level of politicisation of the reading agenda with innovations such as the Premier's Reading Challenge in New South Wales. This programme encourages students in Years 3-8 to read 20 books from selected lists of over 1500 titles. The details of this can be found at Premier's Reading Challenge www.schools.nsw.edu.au/premiersreadingchallenge/. In 2004 it was expected that more than 60,000 students would participate in the challenge. (Berry, 2004a)

Parent involvement

The research within St Andrew's validates the strong role of parents in influencing their sons as readers. Encouraging role models, especially fathers, is a very significant strategy. Sanderson, (1995, p161) recommends that we "target father-son involvement in school literacy projects". At St Andrew's we plan to have this year at least one "Blokes and books" breakfast for fathers and sons, an opportunity to discuss reading. Fathers can be invited to speak at the school assembly about how reading is used in their jobs. Other male role models in the school like sports coaches can be invited in to read to students.

Strategies

A library is the delivery room for the birth of ideas, a place where history comes to life. (Author Norman Cousins, quoted in ALA, 2004)

At St Andrew's we find that our Literature Circles programme meets a large range of educational outcomes and it has been successful in developing a reading culture among our boys. The multi-pronged approach with time for sustained silent reading, sharing ideas and writing a personal response works effectively from the lowest class to the most able. The discussion phase affords the opportunity for peer dialogue about different texts, and gives us the chance to listen to students and talk about the strategies we use when we lose the thread, how we choose books, visualisation techniques, and so on (Sanderson, 1995, 162). Wilhelm & Smith have commented on conversation, "Literacy is intensely social...it grows out of relationships. Boys are likely to read material that can be transported into conversations with their friends" (cited in Myers, 2002). The discussion time provides a forum too for Chambers' 'Three Sharings': The sharing of enthusiasms, the sharing of puzzles and the sharing of connections, and 'The four levels of saying': Saying for yourself, Saying for others, Saying together and Saying the new (Chambers, 1983, pp.141-3). Out of this can arise substantive conversation that can on occasion be deeply personal and moving. The best consequence, however, is the warm and ongoing dialogue it establishes about books between the students and the teacher-librarians, which can continue anytime and anywhere— in the lift, next to the tennis courts, at lunchtime – and out of which arises so many more opportunities for conversation, sharing about books and matching new books to their interests.

Student comments on Literature Circles at St Andrew's

Student responses to Literature Circles, even for students who generally do not enjoy reading, is on the whole positive. They usually want it to continue longer.

I enjoy Literature Circles very much. It's not often when you can sit down and read without getting distracted. (David)

Literature Circles is a good idea, as it gives people an excuse to read and it's far superior to classwork. I like reading and enjoy Literature Circles. (Alex, aged 15)

I think the programme of Literature Circles is fantastic. It gives you time to sit down and read a good book. Then when you are done you can discuss the book with your classmates. Awesome stuff! (Adrian)

Literature Circles:

I thought it was useful because it gets you and your friends reading books.

I didn't know there were so many interesting books around.

I find I could relate to the themes in the books I read.

I found that reading takes your mind off the present and so you can relax and escape.

A good interesting change to class revision. (Sam, aged 15)

Conclusion

A reading culture can be developed and the lack of interest many boys demonstrate in reading can be turned around. Tables 1 and 2 (see Appendix) list the favourite books and authors of our students, and show how many have come from Literature Circles, demonstrating the powerful effect the programme has had on this school. It is important that we, as mediators between boys and literature and students and information, use every skill and opportunity at our disposal to make connections and to forge links on their behalf. A multi-pronged approach which combines a variety of strategies to address boys' engagement with reading and which is appropriate to the learning community of the school is the most effective way forward. Ideally this arsenal of strategies will include a programme which nurtures sustained silent reading.

I would like to close this paper with an adapted quote from an aboriginal elder of the Yolngu people who live in Yirrkala, Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory. In response to the question about what she considered to be the first priority of young Yolngu people, she replied immediately, "Education". The word reading is substituted for education in the quote, which both expresses deep wisdom and encapsulates what we desire for all our students.

Many of our young people are like pelicans, floating on the water, clumsy in flight, forever circling, but not able to reach the heights. Occasionally we see one that is an eagle, able to soar, to dip and weave and dive, to play with air currents. We want all our boys and girls to be eagles. Reading can make them eagles. (Palmer, 2004)

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Author note

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Appendix

Table 1: Nominations in reply to What are the five best fiction books you have read?

BOOKS	10A	9A	9B	9C	9D	9E	9F	7N	TOTAL
Harry Potter (all) *	4	14	13	10	8	5	2	4	60
Ice Station * (A)	1	10	6	4	6	4	8	1	40
Lord of the Rings *	4	5	11	3	4	4	1	6	38
Alex Rider series *		3	2	2	1	2	7	16	33
Tomorrow - the war. series (T) * (A)	8	4		4	2	1	3		22
Area 7 * (A)	1		4	3	5	1	5	1	20
Contest * (A)		1	6	1	5	2	3	1	19
Temple * (A)		1	5		5	1	5		17
To kill a mockingbird (T)	5	6	4	2					17
“Just” series – A. Griffiths (A)		3						10	13
The hobbit	2	2	3	2		2		1	12
Redwall series *	1	2	1				3	3	10
Northern Lights series *		3	1	3					7
Artemis Fowl *	1	1		2		1		2	7
Belgariad/Malloreon (Pawn of prophecy *)	2		1		3				6
Black Hawk Down *		1	1	1		1		1	5
Lockie Leonard * (A)				1	1	1	2		5
Across the nightingale floor * (A)		1				4			5
Dune series		2			1	2			5
Biggles			4					1	5
Holes *		1						3	4
1984 *	4								4
Prey *							4		4
The day my bum went psycho (A)								4	4
Hatchet *				1	1	1			3
Alex Jackson series * (A)					1		2		3
Deadly Unna/Nukkin’ Ya * (A)	3								3

* – text used in Literature Circles

(T) – used as a text in English classes

(A) – Australian novel

A few young children’s titles were removed from the list – Dr Seuss, Mr Men, Spot.

Table 2: Who are your favourite authors?

AUTHORS	10A	9A	9B	9C	9D	9E	9F	7N	TOTAL
Matthew Reilly * (A)	1	11	9	5	7	2	8	1	44
J.R.R.Tolkien *	3	5	8	3	1	2		2	24
J.K. Rowling *	2	7	2	2	2	4	1	4	24
John Marsden (T) (A)	7	5	2	4			2		18
Roald Dahl *				7	2	2			11
Anthony Horowitz *		1		1	2	1	1	5	11
Andy Griffiths (A)		1						7	8
Paul Jennings (A)	1	1	1		2			2	7
Eoin Colfer *		2		2		1		1	6
Tom Clancy				3	2			1	6
David Eddings	2	1			1		1		5
Harper Lee (T)	2		2	1					5
Brian Jacques *	1	1		1				2	5
Lian Hearn * (A)				2		2			4
Michael Crichton *				1		1	2		4
Frank Herbert		1	1		1	1			4
George Orwell *	2		1						3
Phillip Pullman *		2	1						3

* = author whose works have been used in Literature Circles
(T) = author whose works are used as a text in English classes
(A) = Australian author

Table 3 International list of fiction recommended for boys, aged 12-16

(With thanks to many members of the following listservs who contributed:
OZTL_NET, SLM_NET, LM_NET and IASL-LINK)

U.S.A./CANADA	UK
Shannara Series - Terry Brooks	Simpsons comic books
Lord of the rings - J.R.R. Tolkien	Captain Underpants - Dave Pilkey
House of the Scorpion	Horrible Histories series - T. Deary
Any adventure tales by Will Hobbs	Horrible Science series- Nick Arnold
Alex Rider books - Anthony Horowitz	Star Wars: Jedi Apprentices series
Cirque du Freak series - Darren Shan	Hardy Boys
Red Wall series - Brian Jacques	Willard Price series
Harry Potter series - J. K. Rowling	Sabriel/Lirael - Garth Nix
Captain Underpants - Dave Pilkey	Saga of Darren Shan (Cirque du Freak)- Darren Shan
Rule of the bone - Russell Banks	Hatchet - Gary Paulsen
Where the Kissing Never Stops - Ron Koertge	Artemis Fowl series - Eoin Colfer
Monster - Walter Dean Myers	Skellig - David Almond
The Outsiders - S.E. Hinton	Series of unfortunate events - Lemony Snicket
Holes - Louis Sachar	The curious incident of the dog in the night-time - Mark Haddon
A Child Called "It" - Dave Pelzer	Stormbreaker + - Anthony Horowitz
Hatchet series - Gary Paulsen	Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series - Douglas Adams
Joey Pigza Loses Control - J. Gantos	Secret Diary of Adrian Mole aged 13 3/4 - Sue Townsend
The Call of the Wild - Jack London	Last Book in the Universe - Rodman Philbrick
Loamhedge - Brian Jacques	Kensuke's Kingdom - M. Morpurgo
Redwall series - Brian Jacques	Holes - Louis Sachar
A week in the Woods - A. Clements	Raptor - Paul Zindel
Crispin: The Cross of Lead - Avi	Christmas Rat - Avi
Hoot - Carl Hiaasen	Iceman - Chris Lynch
Tomorrow When the War Began - John Marsden	Handbook for boys: a novel - Walter Dean Myers
Shabash! - Ann Walsh	Dogsong - Gary Paulsen
The body of Christopher Creed - Carol Plum-Ucci	Any book by the following authors:
All the pretty horses - Cormac McCarthy	▪ Paul Jennings
Christine - Stephen King	

<p>Artemis Fowl - Eoin Colfer Series of Unfortunate Events - Lemony Snickett Ender books - Orson Scott Card: Ender's game Ender's shadow Shadow of the Hegemon Speaker for the dead Xenocide The Lost years of Merlin series - T.A. Barron (for older teens): Perks of being a wallflower - Chbosky Smack - Burgess Jay's Journal (Go ask Alice type of composite)</p> <p>HUNGARY Saga of Darren Shan series – D. Shan</p> <p>UNITED ARAB EMIRATES Darren Shan books - Darren Shan Alex Rider stories – A. Horowitz Artemis Fowl - Eoin Colfer</p> <p>NAMIBIA Namibian titles: Flash flood - Jenny Winter Diamond - Pashukeni Penda The choice - Pashukeni Penda On the run - Kapache Victor South African titles: Crocodile burning - Michael Williams Overseas titles: Groosham Grange A. Horowitz titles by the following authors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Christopher Pike ▪ R. L. Stine ▪ Lemony Snickett ▪ Stephen King 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Morris Gleitzman ▪ Stephen King ▪ Roald Dahl ▪ Bernard Cornwell ▪ Tony Parsons ▪ Nick Hornby ▪ Raymond Feist ▪ Philip Ardagh ▪ Terry Pratchett <p>AUSTRALIA/NZ Ender's game -- Orson Scott Card Contest, Ice Station, Temple, Area 7, Scarecrow - Matthew Reilly Billy Elliot Lockie Leonard series - Tim Winton Magician [bk 1] - Raymond Feist Game of throne[bk 1] - George R.R. Martin Hatchet series - Gary Paulsen Redwall series - Brian Jacques The War series - John Marsden Any Paul Jennings collection of stories Alive : the story of the Andes survivors - Piers Paul Read Artemis Fowl and sequels- E. Colfer The wind singer & sequels - Nicholson The hobbit - J.R.R. Tolkien Lord of the Rings – J.R.R. Tolkien Books by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nick Earls ▪ Fleur Beale ▪ Markus Zusak <p>Alex Rider novels- Anthony Horowitz Diamond Brothers series– Horowitz Summerland - Michael Chabon Boys of blood and bone - David Metzenthen Mister Monday - Garth Nix Off the rails - Tim Cope and C. Hatherly Big bangs - Beverley McDonald Nights in the sun - Colin Bowles Holes - Louis Sachar Deltora Quest series - Emily Rodda Toad Rage - M. Gleitzman Just series - Andy Griffiths Horrible Histories series Diary of a streetkid M. Clarke Looking for Alibrandi M. Marchetta Harry Potter – J.K. Rowling Go ask Alice Where's Wally books Alex Jackson books – Pat Flynn</p>
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